

FACTSHEET

Veterinary Services

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APHIS' Role in Animal Health and Trade

Protecting agriculture today is a challenge that reaches beyond national, political, and geophysical boundaries. The U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA) Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS) protects and promotes U.S. agriculture by keeping agricultural pests and diseases from entering the country, facilitating agricultural exports, and ensuring science-based regulations in agricultural trade.

Veterinary Services (VS) is the animal health arm of APHIS. VS is dedicated not only to protecting, sustaining, and improving the health, quality, and productivity of the Nation's herds and flocks of livestock and poultry but also to facilitating agricultural trade.

VS strives to serve the livestock producers of this country and also consumers of animal products and citizens concerned about public health and environmental safety. Achieving program goals cannot take place in a vacuum: it requires cooperation with others. To enhance cooperation, VS fosters continuous communication among veterinary professionals in State and foreign governments, industry organizations, and private practice.

VS employees—more than 30 percent of whom have advanced degrees in such specialties as veterinary science, epidemiology, and public health—perform their duties in all parts of the country. Management and staff specialists work at APHIS' headquarters in and near Washington, DC. Currently, the field force operates out of four regional headquarters with field offices in nearly every State, generally in the capital. In the next 2 to 4 years, USDA Secretary Dan Glickman's regional consolidation initiative will streamline the agency's regional field structure into two new regional hubs: an eastern hub in Raleigh, NC, and a western hub in Fort Collins, CO.

Protecting America's Animal Health

Foreign Animal Disease Prevention

If a foreign animal disease became established in American livestock and poultry, the economic consequences to producers and consumers would be severe. For example, eradication of a highly pathogenic avian influenza in the United States, following an outbreak in 1983–84, resulted in the destruction of more than 17 million birds and cost taxpayers nearly \$65 million. This major outbreak also affected consumers causing the cost of poultry and eggs to increase by about one-third in just 6 months.

If an exotic disease such as this were to breach U.S. borders, VS officials would assess the threat and decide how best to respond. One option would be to activate one of two Regional Emergency Animal Disease Eradication Organizations (READEO's), operating out of Raleigh and Fort Collins.

READEO team members are highly trained and ready to fight exotic diseases and parasites anywhere in the United States. READEO personnel confirm the presence of exotic disease, inspect infected and exposed animals, and appraise the value of animals that may have to be destroyed. These employees conduct vaccination programs and epidemiologic studies and are trained to dispose of animal carcasses, clean and disinfect premises, set and enforce regulations against disease spread, and control disease carriers.

The two READEO's conduct regular practice exercises to ensure that workers remain prepared. A recent enhancement to the READEO is a three-member Early Response Team (ERT). The ERT can be deployed anywhere in the United States within 24 hours to assess a disease situation that may lead to the activation of a READEO. In the event of an activation, team members can quickly set up field operations to lead an eradication effort.

Responding to a disease outbreak requires cooperation among VS personnel, State animal health officials, industry, and the public. VS takes the lead in coordinating the efforts of these groups and ensures that the methods for eradicating an outbreak remain current as new technology and research become available.

For example, in December 1996, APHIS sent an ERT to several farms in southeastern Iowa to investigate a disease that was causing sows to abort. The team worked with veterinary practitioners, university diagnostic laboratories, USDA's National Animal Disease Center, the National Pork Producers Council, and the Iowa Pork Producers Association to determine that the disease was an acute form of porcine reproductive and respiratory syndrome, a domestic disease of swine. These actions have led to additional cooperative studies to better understand this acute form of the disease.

Since 1966, VS has successfully eliminated from the United States outbreaks of Venezuelan equine encephalitis, sheep scabies, exotic Newcastle disease, hog cholera, highly pathogenic avian influenza, and screwworms.

Control and Eradication of Domestic Animal Diseases

In addition to preventing the introduction and spread of foreign animal diseases, VS operates programs to control and eliminate certain domestic diseases of cattle, swine, poultry, sheep, and other livestock. These programs work to make U.S. livestock desirable for export to other countries. When such domestic livestock diseases are found, VS regulates the interstate movement and transport of infected and exposed animals to stop further spread of the diseases.

VS' brucellosis eradication program is in its final stages. Since 1934, APHIS has been working cooperatively with the livestock industries and State animal health authorities to eradicate brucellosis from the United States. APHIS' goal is to have no **cattle** or domestic **bison** herds under quarantine for brucellosis by the end of 1998. As of April 1998, there were 10 affected herds in 2 different States. Forty-three States, Puerto Rico, and the U.S. Virgin Islands have already achieved brucellosis-free status, and another five States are in the qualifying period with no known infection. In order to reach this status, a State's domestic cattle and bison populations must be free of infection for 12 consecutive months.

VS is also working to eradicate tuberculosis in cattle and bison. And, VS "tick-riders" patrol the Texas-Mexican border on horseback to prevent the reintroduction of cattle-fever ticks and their associated disease, bovine babesiosis.

While hog cholera has been eliminated from the United States, VS continues to put a high priority on the eradication of pseudorabies and brucellosis from the domestic **swine** population.

The National Poultry Improvement Plan certifies the health of **poultry** breeding flocks, specifically for diseases such as pullorum disease, fowl typhoid, and certain mycoplasmas.

The Voluntary Scrapie Flock Certification Program is a cooperative effort between VS, industry representatives, accredited veterinarians, and State animal health officials. The program provides participating producers with the opportunity to protect their **sheep** from scrapie and to enhance the marketability of their animals through certifying their origin in scrapie-free flocks.

VS helps prevent **equine** diseases in thoroughbreds, pleasure horses, and show horses and protects them from glanders, dourine, and contagious equine metritis through import testing and quarantine procedures.

National Animal Health Monitoring System

Besides helping individual VS programs manage their animal-disease related information, VS operates the National Animal Health Monitoring System (NAHMS).

NAHMS is a cooperative effort to gain health status information about various species of farm animals to benefit producers, exporters, researchers, practicing veterinarians, and local, State, and Federal animal health officials. Information from NAHMS surveys enables producers to improve farm management practices, especially in disease control. Additionally, researchers and veterinarians can access the data base for comparative studies of disease incidence, risk assessment, and preventive treatment techniques.

National Veterinary Services Laboratories

VS' National Veterinary Services Laboratories (NVSL), located in Ames, IA, and Plum Island, NY, provide laboratory support for VS' animal disease control and eradication programs. When a disease diagnosis is necessary, tissue and blood samples are submitted to NVSL. Domestic disease diagnoses are conducted in Ames; tissues from animals suspected of having foreign animal diseases are examined at Plum Island's high-security facility.

Laboratory workers also assist in quality control of animal vaccines and related products. VS laboratory technicians test samples from production runs at manufacturers licensed by VS' Center for Veterinary Biologics. Any biologics that don't meet Federal standards are kept off the market.

Expanding Trade

With the implementation of trade-liberalizing agreements, such as the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade and the North American Free Trade Agreement, and with the creation of the World Trade Organization, the demands facing APHIS have changed dramatically. The volume and complexity of sanitary and phytosanitary issues surrounding trade and the workload associated with regulating imports and facilitating exports are increasing by leaps and bounds. APHIS is in a unique position regarding trade and is striving to carefully balance its responsibilities to safeguard America's agricultural resources with its efforts to open doors for U.S. agricultural exports.

VS' National Center for Import and Export (NCIE) fosters trade in animals and animal products by ensuring safety and fairness in U.S. agricultural trade relations with other countries. NCIE accomplishes this goal by applying equitable, science-based standards of protection to and for agricultural commodities based on international standards, risk analysis, and the use of innovative risk management strategies.

NCIE adopted risk-based regional import requirements in accordance with the World Trade Organization Sanitary and Phytosanitary Agreement. The regulations center around two key points: (1) regionalization and (2) expanded risk assessment and classification. The concept of regionalization is founded on the idea that import requirements should be based on geography and science rather than politics. Risk assessment consists of identifying risk factors and evaluating their seriousness.

The framework NCIE established allows for assessment of animals and animal products for import into the United States based on the status of a region, rather than the entire country. It also established procedures by which regions may request permission to export animals and animal products to the United States under specified conditions, based on the region's disease status.

These new regulations have opened new world markets to U.S. agricultural industries as well as allowed farmers in foreign countries to sell their livestock and products to American consumers. For example, in May 1997, APHIS recognized the Mexican State of Sonora as free of hog cholera and allowed Sonoran producers to export to the United States fresh, chilled, and frozen pork under certain conditions. Prior to the adoption of VS'

regionalization policy, such an area would not have been able to export fresh pork to the United States. One month later, APHIS announced its final rule to allow the importation of fresh or frozen beef from Argentina, finding the country to be a low-risk region for foot-and-mouth disease and rinderpest. Previously, assessments were absolute, not allowing imports from countries that had any incidence of disease.

Facilitating Exports

VS' export certification efforts motivate foreign countries to trust that they are receiving healthy, pest- and disease-free U.S. agricultural shipments.

VS requires foreign countries to abide by strict animal health standards and is committed to managing the export of healthy animals to them in return. VS works with foreign animal health officials to develop protocols that specify the conditions for certifying and testing animals and animal products designated for export. VS employees work closely with exporters, breeders, and private veterinary practitioners to qualify animals and animal products for export.

In Fort Collins, VS has a data base called the International Regulation Retrieval System that lists the animal health requirements of other countries. Both exporters and veterinarians can access this retrieval system free of charge if they have the necessary computer equipment.

Disease Exclusion Through Testing Imports

VS' efforts on the homefront to protect American livestock ensure that U.S. consumers can continue to enjoy the tastes of American products while still sampling the tastes of the rest of the world. VS regulates the importation of live animals, poultry, pet birds, and animal products, such as meats, cheeses, casein, gelatins, certain animal hides and racks, and germ plasm—both semen and embryos. VS carefully monitors all of these commodities for foreign animal diseases, such as avian influenza or hog cholera, diseases that could threaten U.S. livestock populations. For example, countries that have outbreaks of foot-and-mouth disease are not allowed to export fresh, chilled, or frozen meats to the United States. However, such meat products can be shipped into this country if they have been commercially heat processed or cured according to APHIS standards. VS establishes similar

requirements for countries where other animal diseases exist.

Certain live animals, including pet birds, imported from foreign countries may need to be quarantined and examined in USDA animal import centers located in New York, Miami, or Los Angeles before entering the United States to prevent introduction of exotic diseases and pests.

Animal materials imported for research purposes must be accompanied by import permits specifying the intended use. Such materials include organisms, vectors, cell cultures, animal tissues, antibodies, embryos, animal semen, and other genetic material.

Additional Information

VS will continue to protect American agriculture by actively working with producers, industry, and the general public to identify and prevent animal diseases. Veterinarians and livestock and poultry owners who suspect a foreign animal disease should immediately contact State or Federal animal health authorities.

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Current information is also maintained on the Internet. Point your Web browser to <http://www.aphis.usda.gov> to reach the APHIS home page.

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